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AUTHOR Galambos, Nancy L.; Garbarino, James
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ABSTRACT

Despite widespread and growing public and professional concern for latchkey children (children unsupervised before or after school), only a few empirical studies of such children are available. This study examined school adjustment, intrinsic versus extrinsic orientation in the classroom, academic achievement, and fear levels in fifth- and seventh-grade children living in a rural community. Three comparison groups were initially formed, including: (1) 21 children who had working mothers and who were regularly unsupervised before or after school, (2) 29 children of working mothers who reported that their children had continual adult supervision, and (3) 27 children supervised continually by nonworking mothers. A multivariate analysis performed on the dependent measures revealed that latchkey children did not differ significantly from supervised children. Multiple regression analyses also failed to indicate that lack of supervision was predictive of the dependent variables. These results, occurring in a "safe" rural environment, contrast significantly with data gathered in "dangerous" urban environments and suggest that future research examine community settings as mediators in determining the needs of latchkey children. (Author/RH)

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Identifying the Missing Links in the Study of Latchkey Children

Nancy L. Galambos James Garbarino

College of Human Development

The Pennsylvania State University

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Identifying the Missing Links in the Study of Latchkey Children

Nancy L. Galambos & James Garbarino

Abstract

Despite widespread and growing public and professional concern for latchkey children (children who are unsupervised before or after school), only a few empirical studies of such children are available. This study examined the school adjustment, intrinsic versus extrinsic orientation in the classroom, academic achievement, and fear levels of fifth and seventh grade latchkey and nonlatchkey children living in a rural community. A multivariate analysis of variance performed on the dependent measures revealed that latchkey children did not differ significantly from nonlatchkey children. Multiple regression analyses, also, failed to indicate that lack of supervision was predictive of the dependent variables. These results from a "safe" rural environment contrast significantly with data from "dangerous" urban environments and suggest that future research examine community settings as mediators in determining the needs of latchkey children.

Identifying the Missing Links in the
Study of Latchkey Children

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, widespread attention has been given to the issue of maternal employment and its effects on children. This interest in children with mothers employed outside the home emerged primarily because of the rapidly growing number of mothers who joined the labor force in the last few decades. The U.S. Department of Commerce (1981) reported that by 1980, 45 percent of married, American mothers with children under 6 and 62 percent of such mothers with school-age children were participating in the labor force. As more mothers became gainfully employed, professionals and parents became increasingly concerned about children who are left alone without adult supervision while their mothers are on the job. A recent survey revealed that in the early 1970s, 13 percent of children between the ages of 7 and 13 were without adult supervision before or after school hours (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1976). These unsupervised children are called "latchkey children" because they often wear housekeys attached to strings around their necks in order to permit independent entry into their homes.

Only a few researchers have examined this issue empirically. Woods (1972) reported that unsupervised girls, in her sample of black ghetto children, had significant personality adjustment and academic achievement problems. Gold and Andres (1978a; 1978b), however, found no significant differences in school adjustment and achievement of unsupervised and supervised children in Montreal, Canada. A more recent unpublished study conducted in Washington, D.C., found that latchkey children experienced more fears and nightmares than children who were continually supervised (Long & Long, 1982).

Taken together, the results of these studies show that the evidence regarding the welfare of latchkey children is insufficient to point to clearcut

negative or positive consequences. The present study attempted to build upon existing work by answering the following question. How does a lack of supervision affect the child's school adjustment, academic achievement, orientation to the classroom, and fear of going outdoors alone?

Subjects

Letters, questionnaires concerning child care arrangements, and consent forms were mailed to all 461 parents of third, fifth, and seventh graders in a rural school district. Thirty-three percent of the questionnaires were returned, and children were then selected on the basis of reported child care arrangements. Because of a virtual absence of latchkey children in the third grade, only fifth and seventh graders were included in the study. All 21 children who were regularly unsupervised before or after school and who had mothers employed outside the home were subjects. Another group of 29 children with employed mothers who reported continual adult supervision participated in the study. Twenty-seven children who were continually supervised by non-employed mothers were randomly chosen to comprise the third group of subjects. Thus, the total sample was composed of 77 subjects (39 fifth graders and 38 seventh graders). The family background characteristics of the three groups are shown in Table 1.

Procedure

Homeroom teachers of fifth grade subjects and English teachers of seventh grade subjects completed a measure of the child's school adjustment, the AML Behavior Rating Scale (Cowen et al., 1973). All teachers had known the children for at least three months. The ratings were completed at approximately the same time that subjects participated in the study.

Within a four week period, all subjects completed Harter's (1981) Scale of Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Orientation in the Classroom. The scale was

administered to separate groups of fifth and seventh graders. This measure consists of five subscales: Preference for Challenge, Curiosity, Independent Mastery, Independent Judgment, and Internal Criteria. At the same time, the children completed a forced choice question that was designed to determine the extent to which the children feared going outdoors alone.

The Stanford Achievement Test, which had been administered to all children in the school district six months earlier, served as the measure of academic achievement. Total reading and total math scores were used.

Results

A 2(grade) x 2(sex) x 3(group--supervision/maternal employment status) multivariate analysis of variance was used to analyze the school adjustment, classroom orientation, achievement, and fear levels of the subjects. Several main effects for grade suggested that seventh graders were better adjusted and more intrinsically oriented than fifth graders. Females were found to be more curious and fearful than males while males scored higher on the internal criteria scale. There were no significant main effects or interactions for group, thereby demonstrating that latchkey children performed no differently in school than did nonlatchkey children, nor were they more fearful of being outside alone. The means and standard deviations of the dependent measures for the three groups are shown in Table 2.

In addition, simple multiple regressions were used to determine the most important predictors of school adjustment, the five classroom orientation scores, and academic achievement. Grade, sex, income, single vs. two-parent family, mother's employment status, and group were entered into the regression analyses. The values for R^2 ranged from .07 to .26 with very few significant predictors, thus, reflecting the results obtained from the multivariate analysis of variance.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that in a rural area that is relatively free from crime, latchkey children are not any more or less socially and academically adjusted and fearful than children who are regularly supervised by an adult. This conclusion is supported by the few studies that have, also, found no significant differences between latchkey and nonlatchkey children in an environment that is characterized as relatively safe (Gold & Andres, 1978a; 1978b). In contrast, negative experiences for latchkey children have been demonstrated in inner city areas (Long & Long, 1982; Woods, 1972). Thus, there appear to be community differences with respect to the latchkey child's response to his/her situation. In Table 3, the community settings and findings of the available studies of latchkey children are presented.

Surprisingly, the context in which the unsupervised child lives has received little attention. Community and neighborhood characteristics may, indeed, affect the extent to which a mother feels comfortable in allowing her child self-supervision and may influence how well the child is able to adjust to the latchkey situation. In urban areas that are apt to harbor criminal or gang activity, the latchkey child may be restricted to a life indoors, simply for safety reasons. The child who is allowed to play outside, which is probably a more likely occurrence in a safe neighborhood, may very well be better adjusted than the child who is restricted.

There is more to the issue of the child's community than the urban-rural dimension, of course. Neighborhoods within an urban area can be characterized by differences in social supports, cohesion, and stability. An urban neighborhood that is supportive, cohesive, and stable may be an optimal environment for the latchkey child. The alienated and mobile urban neighborhood, however, may not be protective of unsupervised children and may, therefore, present risks to the child.

Future research on latchkey children should be directed at examining the various contexts in which they live. Rather than simply searching for differences between latchkey and nonlatchkey children, researchers could look at various aspects of communities that help to determine the experiences of the latchkey child. Such aspects include the number of playgrounds, local crime rates, friendliness between neighbors, the age of members within the community, the number of children, and neighborhood and family support systems. Development of measures to assess such characteristics from community to community is a high research priority. We have made progress to the point where we are asking, "What are the characteristics in the latchkey child's context that affect that child's personal and social development?"

Table 1

The Sample and Background Characteristics

	Unsupervised Children of Employed Mothers (Latchkey)	Supervised Children of Employed Mothers	Supervised Children of Nonemployed Mothers
Fifth Grade	12 (6 males and 6 females)	15 (6 males and 9 females)	12 (6 males and 6 females)
Seventh Grade	9 (5 males and 4 females)	14 (9 males and 5 females)	15 (6 males and 9 females)
Single-parent Families	4	3	0
Number of Children in Family	2.4	2.5	2.8
SES	Low to middle income	Low to middle income	Low to middle income
Mother's Education	Majority had high school diplomas	Majority had high school diplomas	Majority had high school diplomas
Mother's Length of Employment	7 years	8 years	--
Father's Education	Majority had high school diplomas	Majority had high school diplomas	Majority had high school diplomas

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Academic Behavior and Fear of Outdoors Scores by Group

Dependent Measures	Unsupervised/ Employed Group (Latchkey) (n=20)	Supervised/ Employed Group (n=28)	Supervised/ Nonemployed Group (n=27)
AML Behavior Rating Scale (Cowen et al., 1973)			
School Adjustment	20.95	17.86	18.85
S.D.	8.15	6.60	7.23
Classroom Orientation Scale (Harter, 1981)			
Preference for Challenging Work	2.79	2.80	2.95
S.D.	.72	.62	.64
Curiosity About World	3.07	2.93	2.90
S.D.	.59	.61	.52
Independent Mastery of Tasks	2.61	2.75	2.81
S.D.	.65	.50	.65
Independent Judgment of Work to be Completed	2.18	2.69	2.36
S.D.	.54	.63	.68
Internal Criteria for Success/Failure	2.58	2.61	2.80
S.D.	.79	.78	.81
Stanford Achievement Test			
Reading	69.25	66.50	69.70
S.D.	19.55	26.32	23.61
Math	64.75	62.61	62.56
S.D.	20.09	24.92	24.28
Additional Multiple-Choice Question			
Fear of Being Outdoors Alone	2.15	1.96	1.96
S.D.	.75	.74	.65

Note: Higher scores for School Adjustment indicate less adjustment. Higher scores on Harter's five subscales indicate a more intrinsic orientation. Higher Reading and Math scores indicate higher academic achievement. A higher Fear score indicates more fear.

Table 3

Summary of Community Settings and Findings from Studies of Latchkey Children

Study	Subjects	Community Setting	SES	Dependent Variables	Results
Woods (1972)	5th-grade black children	Ghetto in a major U. S. city	Low income	Personality and social adjustment; academic achievement; IQ; accident, illness, and delinquency rates	Latchkey children, especially girls had lower achievement, lower IQ scores, and were less socially adjusted than nonlatchkey children
Gold & Andres (1978b)	10-year-old white children	Suburbs of a major Canadian city	Low and middle income	Personality and social adjustment; academic achievement; sex role concepts	No significant differences between latchkey and nonlatchkey children
Gold & Andres (1978a)	14-16-year-old white adolescents	Suburbs of a major Canadian city	Low and middle income	Personality and social adjustment; academic achievement; sex role concepts	No significant differences between latchkey and nonlatchkey children
Long & Long (1982)	1st-6th grade black children	Major U. S. city	--	Fears; Nightmares	Latchkey children expressed fears and reported nightmares to a far greater extent than did nonlatchkey children
Galambos & Garbarino (present study)	5th- and 7th-grade white children	Rural community in New York State	Low and middle income	Social adjustment; academic achievement; Intrinsic versus extrinsic orientation	No significant differences between latchkey and nonlatchkey children

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